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Music

MISSING BOB HITE: Two Reminiscences

Death has no mercy. It's a blues line that applies to everyone, naturally, just as it did to Bob Hite, 38, leader and "Bear" *extraordinaire* of Canned Heat, late last Sunday night after a set in a city club. Taken ill following the finish of the first half of the evening, Hite died in the band's van shortly after. The man went out playing, and while there's little consolation in such a tragic loss of a young musician, there's also a sort of solace in that he played long and suffered little.

It's always hard to look death in the eye. An area most people ignore, the end of a life is something we all eventually face, have little control over and fear for its finality. In the blues world, which is obviously much closer to its end than its beginning, with the constant passing of originators and their immediate followers, death has taken a particularly hard toll. So when news spread Monday morning about Hite's passing, first reactions were grief for his family and friends, and then a setting sorrow about the loss of another kindred spirit in a shrinking clan. There's so few still working that rich American musical vein that one less seasoned explorer hurts, *bad*. When the blues people check out, I always immediately think of those I know who also cherish that crackling sound of rural and urban America — those notes and feelings that have shaped our lives like few other things or thoughts have been able to — and wonder how *they* are. After all, it's the living that must carry on.

While I never met Bob Hite, I felt an immediate bond with the man when I walked into the Catacombs Club in Houston in 1967 and heard the group hit the opening notes of Muddy Waters' "Rollin' and Tumblin'." Blues buffs were few and far between then — still are — and we banded together like an endangered species. A show in Austin a year later, where harp player Alan Wilson, then two years away from death himself, played solos I never thought I'd hear live from a harmonica, confirmed that Canned Heat really *cared* about their blues. That night, Hite, centerstage in the University of Texas gymnasium, pushed the band for all they were worth, like a charging cheerleader. "The Bear's" spirit and soul loomed large; physical size notwithstanding, it was the inner depth which truly made the big man *big*. R.I.P. Bob Hite, and thanks for the music. Living memories never die, and you gave us a lot. Likely, that could be what it's all about, anyway.

—Bill Bentley

James Harman, a singer/harp player/blues-nut, fronts his own group and is a fellow traveler in the soul world. A close friend of Hite, Harman agreed to share a few remembrances of the man that led Canned Heat from their start in Los Angeles in the mid-'60s. Though it was tough asking someone to talk so soon about someone so irreplaceable, he offered to give it a shot. Better, he said, "than let a stranger do it." Harman turned over a wealth of stories, and what follows is a skeletal few:

At eight this morning the phone rang, and a friend said, "The Bear is dead." Twenty minutes later we hung up and the story started sinking in. My mind wandered back to 1967 and the first time I heard Bob Hite sing. I'd quit playing music and was going civilian, positive the public would not buy a white guy singing blues. A D.J. friend at the local station in Panama City, Florida, called to say he had some new records I *had* to hear. One of them was Canned Heat's first album; the slide guitar, harp blowing and shuffle and shout were all there. I got excited hearing white guys from California playing Southern rural and urban blues and really reaching for those notes — loud and raunchy. If they could do it, and make records, I should keep trying.

I started reading articles written by Bob Hite, Henry Vestine, and Alan Wilson, all members of Canned Heat, and realized these guys were also knowledgeable and scholarly record collectors and theorists, as well as being talented musicians. After moving to Miami to begin playing again, their band came to town for a concert. After hearing them live, it was amazing how loud, but in control, they were. Larry Taylor's bass playing was the best I could imagine; Fito, the drummer, incredible; Alan Wilson was immediately my new favorite musician; and right in the middle was "The Bear," who became the living symbol of "boogie." I got backstage and talked to Bob and Alan for a short time and found out these guys had it. We talked records, sound equipment and more, but mostly *music*. It was great; they were just like I'd hoped they'd be.

Our next meeting was a year later; Vestine had left the band and Harvey Mandel was playing guitar. Talking after the show again, I traded camera stories with Larry Taylor and then talked about harps with Alan. He gave me the soloist Marine Band harp he'd used on their third album; I still play it today on "Crazy Mixed Up World" — a little like trying to keep the circle unbroken. Bob and I talked lyrics and struck up a quick friendship.

When our band moved to California — inspired by Canned Heat and wanting to get into the blues and record collecting scene here — I ended up getting Hite's phone number from a woman at a laundromat. She walked up to me and said, "You look like The Bear." I asked

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by Pleasant Gehman

Your faithful scribe hot-footed it up the road to San Francisco last weekend for 48 hours of totally rad rock 'n' roll madness. Friday night stopped by the **STONE (DAS BLOK, HUMANS** and **RED ROCKERS)**, but skipped the **DEAD KENNEDYS** at the **FAB MAB** because it looked intolerably crowded. Saturday night at **CALIFORNIA HALL** was what has to rank as one of the year's best shows: the **BLASTERS**, West Coast debut of the new improved **CRAMPS** and **X**.

Although the place was packed, the atmosphere was peaceful and fun. In spite of power failures all through the night — amps kept dying on the Blasters and the stage and house-lights went during the Cramps' set — all the bands acted like regular troupers and the show went smoothly, if not technically copacetic. Cramps' new guitarist **KID CONGO POWERS** fit right in as the missing link, **LUX INTERIOR** got pulled into the crowd and re-emerged on stage with his pants down, and they played a lot of great new tunes.

X's set was particularly hot, with **EXENE** diaphanous in black chiffon and a jacket most of the audience would've killed for — skull and crossbones with "SOCIETY'S OUTCAST" inscribed on the back. They ripped through one hit after another, and the wild "It's Who You Know" (hope that's on the new album!) had the crowd going nuts with some good old-fashioned pogoing — not slamming. Later, the **MUTANTS** held a big party. Among the distinguished guests was **MARGOT OLAVARIA**, stopping over in S.F. en route to Reno and New York City. What a wild weekend!

STIV "Call Me Casanova" **BATORS** will be in town next week doing some promo work for his Bomp LP before he departs to Germany and points unknown to tour with his new band the **WANDERERS**, which is comprised of ex-**SHAM 69ers**. When will they play here?

You know, I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but another club's down. This time it's the **DETOUR**, closed (music-wise, anyway) due to (what else?) complaining neighbors. Will it never end?

LEGAL WEAPON has been getting a lot of KROQ airplay with their giggly "No One Listens." Well, the only way you can listen to it is on the radio, because it ain't on vinyl yet. But it sure sounds good.

Synthi-combo **GREEN WHEELS** have added a lovely called **LAURIE**, on (you guessed it) synthesiser; they'll be playing April 23 at **CLUB 88** if you want to catch them.

IRS held a signing bash for the **GO-GO'S** last week at **KELBO'S** on Fairfax, complete with roses and tropical drinks, pic-snapping and contract signing. The only thing missing was hula-boys.

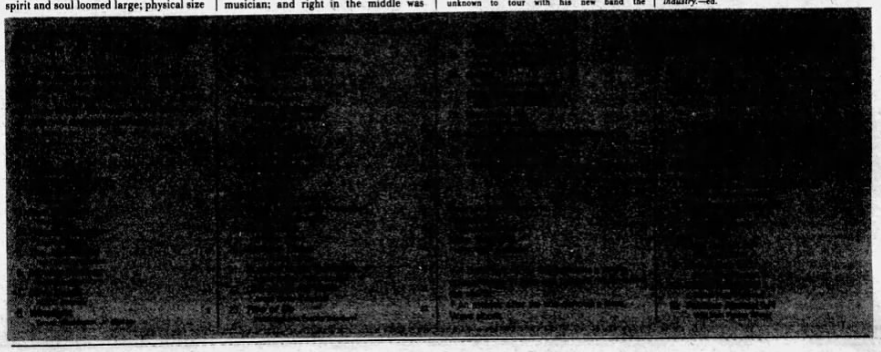
Later on in the evening at **PARAMOUNT STUDIOS** there was a screening of **"URGH! A MUSIC WAR,"** the epic rock film we've been waiting for. There are so many bands in the film that there's one for everyone, though the movie does tend to get a bit L-O-N-G at times. A great idea, even if it could've been edited better. Highlights were **ECHO & THE BUNNYMEN** (who'll be at the Whisky soon), **U2**, **KLAUS NOMI** complete with Nubian dancing girls, and our own **WALL OF VOODOO**.

There are some goodies to look forward to April 10 at **PERKINS PALACE** — a surfing extravaganza with the **SURF PUNKS, JON AND THE NIGHT-RIDERS** and the **ALLEYCATS**. Also **HAL JEPSON** surfin' and skatin' films and the **PEPSI-COLA SKATEBOARD TEAM.**

April 30 at the **WHISKY** will be an acoustic night, featuring soft sounds by such unlikely people as **GEZA X, RICHARD MELTZER**, the **CIRCLE JERKS, ELLA AND THE BLACKS** and a cast of thousands. Ink that one into your little black book — it's sure to be **AN EVENT.**

The **SHEIKS OF SHAKE** are back in action with new bassist **GIL T.**, formerly of porcine hipsters the **RHYTHM PIGS.** Watch for gigs soon. ■

This will be Pleasant Gehman's last solo column for a while. She's taken a job as a booking agent for local groups and so can't be writing about bands she may be involved with. She will, however, continue to contribute weekly stems on visiting acts and on the industry.—ed.



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